

CAN PRIESTS REMIT SIN?

October 28, 1996 (David Cloud, Fundamental Baptist Information Service, P.O. Box 610368, Port Huron, MI 48061, 866-295-4143, fbns@wayoflife.org) -

JOHN 20:23 -- "Whose soever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whose so ever sins ye retain, they are retained."

The Roman Catholic Church claims to find in this verse the authority exercised by its pope and priests to remit sins. This is a perversion of Scripture and a great blasphemy. Consider these two facts: First, Catholicism places forgiveness of sins into the hands of its priests. There is nothing in John 20:23, though, about a priesthood which is ordained to offer sacrifices and remit sins. The Apostles were not priests and they did not offer sacrifices. The only priesthood we read of in the New Testament church is (a) the high priesthood of Jesus Christ (Hebrews 7-8), and (b) the general priesthood of all believers (1 Peter 2:5,9). Second, in the New Testament Scriptures we never read that the other Christians confessed their sins to the Apostles. The Bible teaches that it is blasphemous to claim that a mere man can forgive sins (Luke 5:21). Sin is always confessed directly to God (Ps. 32:5; 51:4; 86:5; Dan. 9:19). This is how Christ taught us to pray (Luke 11:2,3). James 5:16 says, "Confess your faults to one another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed," but this refers to all Christians and not merely to the Apostles. And note that James does not say that Christians have the authority to forgive sins; he says they have the responsibility to pray for one another that GOD will heal and forgive sins.

John 20:23 does not refer to Rome's auricular confession; it refers to the power of the Gospel. This verse has a two-fold application:

1. THIS REFERS TO THE EFFICACY OF THE GOSPEL. In the previous verses Christ had commissioned the disciples to go forth with the Gospel. "Peace be unto you: as my Father hath sent me, even so send I you" (v. 21). In Matthew 28, Mark 16, and Luke 24 we see that this involves preaching the Gospel to every creature. In this connection the Lord Jesus Christ gave the disciples the Holy Spirit and instructed them that the ministry they would perform and the message they would preach would determine the eternal destinies of men. It speaks of the solemn obligation that belongs to every Christian in fulfilling the Great Commission. Men will be judged solely by the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ as it is proclaimed by Christ's disciples down through the centuries. See Acts 2:38; 13:38,39; 16:31; Rom. 1:16; 2:16; 2 Cor. 2:14-16; 5:18-20.

2. THIS ALSO REFERS TO APOSTOLIC AUTHORITY. The Apostles had a unique position in laying the foundation for the churches (Eph. 2:20). They wrote the New Testament Scriptures and established the first churches. They had authority which was unique to that work. We see this in such passages as Acts 5:3-9 and 13:9-11. This special apostolic authority ceased with the death of the Apostles. In eternity there are only 12 Apostles (Rev. 21:14). Their office was not passed on to others at their deaths.

"It is certain God alone can forgive sins; and it would be not only blasphemous but grossly absurd to say that any creature could remit the guilt of a transgression which had been committed against the Creator. The apostles received from the Lord the doctrine of reconciliation and the doctrine of condemnation. They who believed on the Son of God, in consequence of their preaching, had their sins remitted; and they who would not believe were declared to lie under condemnation" (Adam Clarke's Commentary on the Bible).

"Christ, being risen for our justification, sends his gospel heralds to proclaim the jubilee begun, the act of indemnity now passed; and by this rule men shall be judged. God will never alter this rule of judgment, nor vary from it; those whom the gospel acquits shall be acquitted, and those whom the gospel condemns shall be condemned, which puts immense honour upon the ministry, and should put immense courage into ministers. Two ways the apostles and ministers of Christ remit and retain sin, and both as having authority: (1) By sound doctrine. They are commissioned to tell the world that salvation is to be had upon gospel terms, and no other, and they shall find God will say Amen to it; so shall their doom be. (2) By a strict discipline, applying the general rule of the gospel to particular persons. 'Whom you admit into communion with you, according to the rules of the gospel, God will admit into communion with himself; and whom you cast out of communion as impenitent, and obstinate in scandalous and infectious sins, shall be bound over to the righteous judgment of God'" (Matthew Henry). See Matt. 18:17-19; 1 Cor. 5:3-5.